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Panels Have New Chiefs

Looking for A Handle on Intelligence Activities

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS

WASHINGTON — When Senator Dave Durenberger, the new chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, held the panel's first public meeting last week, he told his colleagues that serving on the committee was a "thankless duty," but an intriguing one. "There is a good deal of mystery — and a lot of curiosity — about what this committee does," the Minnesota Republican said.

More curiosity than usual is directed at the Intelligence Committees in both houses of Congress these days. They have both acquired new leaders. In the Senate, Mr. Durenberger, a former Army counterintelligence officer who is in his second term, succeeds Barry Goldwater of Arizona. In the House, Lee H. Hamilton, a Democrat from Indiana with 20 years of experience on the Foreign Affairs Committee, replaces Edward P. Boland of Massachusetts. Membership on the committees is limited to eight years for senators and six for representatives.

The bipartisan spirit that once governed the committees' deliberations has been eroded by bitter wrangling over the Reagan Administration's covert operations in Nicaragua. Moreover, Congress and the Central Intelligence Agency have become tangled in a web of mutual suspicion and recrimination. Senator Daniel P. Moynihan of New York resigned as the panel's vice chairman last year to protest the agency's failure to inform Congress about its actions. Asked about his priorities, Mr. Durenberger said, referring to the C.I.A.: "Number one, we've got to get the trust back on both sides. They've got to trust us, and we've got to trust them."

That will not be easy. The committees were established in the mid-70's, when many in Congress thought the C.I.A. was roaming out of control. The panels' basic role is to approve the agency's budget. But the C.I.A. is also required by law to keep them informed about covert operations. Every night, the committees' high-security Capitol hide-away receives copies of secret cables from the agency.

The committees have usually labored in placid obscurity, but that began to change when American aid to rebels fighting the Government in Nicaragua became an issue. House Democrats started voting against the aid, while Senate Republicans supported it. The division was deepened by disclosures that American agents had helped to mine Nicaraguan harbors, and to write a manual condoning assassination.

Congress agreed last fall to appropriate \$14 million for the rebels in the current fiscal year, but said the money could not be spent until the lawmakers specifically voted to release it sometime after Feb. 28. Both Mr. Durenberger and Mr. Hamilton oppose resumption of the covert operations, but are talking with the Administration about finding more open ways to finance the rebels.

Whether a compromise is worked out could well depend on how the chairmen get along with C.I.A. Director William J. Casey. To lawmakers from both parties, Mr. Casey is the main source of mistrust between the Congress and the agency. They say he seldom answers questions frankly or provides useful information. "Casey himself has poisoned the water as far as relations between the committees and the agency," said Representative Norman Y. Mineta, a California Democrat who served a six-year term on the committee. "Bill Casey does not trust politicians — period," Senator Durenberger added.

In addition, both chairmen believe that the agency has failed to live up to its legal responsibility to keep Congress fully informed about its secret operations. The Senate committee hopes to solve the problem by setting down rules requiring the agency to report regularly to Capitol Hill. The House committee will depend more on informal meetings; Mr. Hamilton had a lengthy breakfast with Mr. Casey last week. "Fundamentally, it's a problem of attitude," the Indiana Democrat said. Both he and Mr. Durenberger want to enlist the aid of nonpartisan professional experts. In the Senate, Mr. Durenberger and Senator Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont, the committee's ranking Democrat, agreed to dismiss Angelo M. Codevilla, an outspoken staff member with close ties to conservative activists.

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Both panels have long agendas. Mr. Durenberger wants to correct what he sees as a false view of intelligence gathering, and has hired a public information specialist to help. "Most people assume agents are out there slitting throats and planting bugs, the stuff they see in the movies," he said. "But that's not intelligence."

Senator Leahy stresses that Congress needs to be better able to determine for itself whether any future arms control pact with the Soviet Union can be verified. "This committee can make or break any arms control agreement," the Vermont Democrat said.

Representative Hamilton wants to find out if "we're getting the best possible intelligence for the lowest cost." He also believes that the agency focuses too heavily on collecting data, and not enough on distributing it. "If the commander in the field doesn't know a truck bomb is coming, the information doesn't do any good," he said.

Mr. Durenberger says serving on the Intelligence Committee is a tough job, because lawmakers hear only one side of any argument — the C.I.A.'s — and cannot talk about what they hear to others. But it is a sign of the times that more members applied for the intelligence panels this year than any others in Congress. "There is certainly a mystique about just being on the Intelligence Committee," Mr. Mineta said. "This is where the action is. It's a window into what's happening in the future."